

The Cost of Discipleship: Dietrich Bonhoeffer

February 2, 2003, Charles St-Onge

Introduction

Dietrich was born in Germany in 1906. In the first years of the Nazi regime he protested against the movement, especially what he thought was the apathy of the state church's pastors and people toward their Christian calling vis-à-vis the rise of fascism. He supported the signing of the *Barmen Theses* criticizing the German church's support of Nazism. He then pastored a church in London, taught in the United States, and led the seminary of the Confessing Church of Germany at Finkenwald in Pomerania. He was hung by the German government shortly before the end of the war for his supposed complicity in a plot to assassinate Hitler.¹

Bonhoeffer was keenly interested in the life of the Christian. He felt that the German state church had succumbed to a Christianity that paid only lip service to discipleship. Though committed to the idea of justification by grace through faith, Bonhoeffer thought that "faith" had come to mean little more than intellectual assent to the work of Christ. He feared that the church had turned the favor and merits of God in Christ Jesus into a "cheap grace," that cost Christians little and mocked the sacrifices God made on humanity's behalf. This cheap grace manifested itself in the life of ordinary German Christians:

The upshot of it all is that my only duty as a Christian is to leave the world for an hour or so on a Sunday morning and go to church to be assured that my sins are all forgiven. I need no longer try to follow Christ, for cheap grace, the bitterest foe of discipleship, which true discipleship must loathe and detest, has freed me from that.²

This is not to say that a Christian with true faith would be without sin. Indeed, it is only when the Christian has indeed committed himself to following Christ that he truly recognizes the depths of his sin and requires a Savior. Then God's grace is no longer cheap, but costly. Bonhoeffer writes, "Yes...become a sinner...and be bold about it. But to whom can such words be addressed, except to those who...make a daily renunciation of sin?"³

The Call of Christ

Bonhoeffer understands the whole of the Christian life as a response to the call of Jesus. This call, first of all, is not a call to follow an ethic or a set of moral principles. Jesus is not yet another great ethical teacher. In Bonhoeffer's words, "Jesus summons men to follow him not as a teacher or pattern of the good life, but as the Christ, the Son of God."⁴ As the Son of God, he calls efficaciously, and he calls to follow *him*. We are not called to walk *as* he walked, but to walk *where* he walks. "When we are called to follow Christ, we are summoned to an exclusive attachment to his person," not his work.⁵ It is Christ who makes such a walk possible. In fact, everything that God gives is given in Christ. "For the Christian the only God-given realities are those he receives from Christ. What is not given us through the incarnate Son is not given us by God."⁶ (C of D, 109) What Christ gives is the possibility of following, of answering his call. We do not need to find the power of obedience within our own being; it is Christ who makes obedience possible. For example, when Christ calls us to be the salt and light of the world, we will find that we "have been made salt by the call [we] have received," by Christ himself.⁷

Second, the call is not a call to live a more righteous and 'blessed' life as modern Evangelicals preach. Rather, it is call to kill the old, sinful flesh within. Bonhoeffer writes "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."⁸ Bonhoeffer also writes often of suffering, speaking of the suffering to which Christ

has called his church, and referring to Col. 1:24.^A He writes, “His disciples keep the peace by choosing to endure suffering themselves rather than inflict it on others.”⁹ The life of the Christian is not a choice to live an ‘abundant’ life, but a life of spiritual warfare. “When all is said and done, the life of faith is nothing if not an unending struggle of the spirit...against the flesh.”¹⁰ This life is lived out in the context of the world. There is to be no withdrawal to a monastic community. But neither does being in the world mean acquiescence to the world’s ways, for Bonhoeffer. Rather, “The value of the secular calling for the Christian is that it provides an opportunity of living the Christian life with the support of God’s grace, and of engaging more vigorously in the assault on the world and everything it stands for.”¹¹

Third, the call to discipleship is a call to participate in the life of the Body of Christ, which is the Church. Bonhoeffer writes, “It is impossible to become a new man as a solitary individual. The new man means more than the individual believer after he has been justified and sanctified. It means the Church...”¹² The new man, the Church, is the place where Christ is present. Only in the Church can his call to discipleship be heard through the ministry of Word and Sacrament. The call is heard by all in the Word, and specifically to believers in Baptism and in the Lord’s Supper. Bonhoeffer writes, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper belong to the fellowship of the Body of Christ alone, whereas the Word is intended not only for believers but also for unbelievers.”¹³ It is in the Church that the old man is killed, because only Christ can kill him. There is no other way for the old Adam to die than “in, through and with Christ.”¹⁴ In addition to Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, the old flesh is also killed through confession, which Bonhoeffer believes is “the God-given remedy for self-deception and self-indulgence.”¹⁵

Faith and Obedience

This call to obedience is not in addition to or beside faith. For Bonhoeffer, obedience and faith are two sides of the same coin. “Does not obedience follow faith as good fruit grows on a tree? First, faith, then obedience.”¹⁶ In some cases, Bonhoeffer’s description of the Christian’s obedience makes it sound like he is advocating a salvation by works. For example, he writes at one point that “If you dismiss the word of God’s command, you will not receive his word of grace.”¹⁷ He also writes that Christians can never appeal to our confession or be saved simply on the ground that we have made it.”¹⁸ Yet he explains who he believes he is still teaching salvation through faith alone in this way:

‘Only those who believe obey,’ is what we say to that part of a believer’s soul which obeys, and ‘only those who obey believe,’ is what we say to that part of the soul of the obedient which believes. If the first half of the proposition stands alone, the believer is exposed to the danger of cheap grace...If the second half stands alone, the believer is exposed to the danger of salvation through works.”¹⁹

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer is adamant that Christ alone is the Savior, and that he alone in fact saves. Christ’s call, as an effectual call, also gives Christ’s righteousness to his followers. “By calling them he has admitted them to partnership with himself, and made them partakers of his righteousness in its fullness.”²⁰ In fact, Bonhoeffer says that the one truly following Christ will despair of his own works, and come to see them as worthless. His only worth will be in found in Christ. We are, in his words, “unaware of our own righteousness.”²¹ This is how it should be. Because the only way we can be righteous in God’s sight is by Christ’s righteousness, apprehended through faith on the part of the believer, a faith that is the obedient response to Christ’s gracious call. “Thus the only way we can be righteous in the sight of God is by recognizing that he only is righteous, and we ourselves sinners in the totality of our being.”²²

^A Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. (Col. 1:24, ESV)

Conclusion

Bonhoeffer takes a theological position over and against the state church of his time not dissimilar from the position taken by Pascal and Spener. Bonhoeffer is concerned that the Gospel is being preached in such a way that Christians no longer take seriously Christ's call to take up the cross and follow him. Bonhoeffer does seek to remain faithful to the Lutheran tradition. He emphasizes Christ's effective and true presence in the Word preached and the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. He also takes seriously Luther's teaching of justification by grace through faith, and includes quotes from Luther to demonstrate that he has not abandoned this foundational Lutheran doctrine. He does not teach a "perfectionism," but rather faith as a real exercise of trust and obedience. He also emphasizes the need for daily dying and death, a theme unique to Lutheranism as compared to the Reformed emphasis on the new life.

Bonhoeffer's argument is compelling, given the rising tendency in the Church (widely understood) to water down the Christian understanding of discipleship, or at least to water it down for one's own community and retain it for other communities.^B If Christ calls us to abandon everything for his sake, he must have been serious. Yet Bonhoeffer is sensitive to the danger of "works-righteousness," the belief that one's attempt to fulfill the law has somehow merited Christ's favor. He does attempt to limit this danger by speaking of Christ as the only Savior, and the only one who can empower any discipleship by means of his call. In the end, Bonhoeffer's arguments are well worth pondering in a time when "discipleship" has become little more than a synonym for listening to Christian Radio and sporting an "It's Okay to Pray" bumper sticker on the back of your Lincoln Navigator.

^B I note here especially the GBLT (Gay, Bisexual, Lesbian, and Transsexual) community's attempt to eliminate the discipleship requirement regarding their own sin, while continuing to speak of other fiscal and environmental sins. The attempt of well-to-do Evangelicals to downplay Jesus' call to financial discipleship and stress sins which do not directly affect their community – homosexuality, for example – is the other side of the same coin.

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- ¹ *Lutheran Cyclopedia*. Erwin Lueker, ed. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975.
- ² Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*. (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1963 c. 1937). 54.
- ³ Bonhoeffer, 57.
- ⁴ Bonhoeffer, 62.
- ⁵ Bonhoeffer, 63.
- ⁶ Bonhoeffer, 109.
- ⁷ Bonhoeffer, 130.
- ⁸ Bonhoeffer, 99.
- ⁹ Bonhoeffer, 126.
- ¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, 190.
- ¹¹ Bonhoeffer, 298.
- ¹² Bonhoeffer, 271.
- ¹³ Bonhoeffer, 281.
- ¹⁴ Bonhoeffer, 257.
- ¹⁵ Bonhoeffer, 325.
- ¹⁶ Bonhoeffer, 69.
- ¹⁷ Bonhoeffer, 73.
- ¹⁸ Bonhoeffer, 215.
- ¹⁹ Bonhoeffer, 74.
- ²⁰ Bonhoeffer, 141.
- ²¹ Bonhoeffer, 176.
- ²² Bonhoeffer, 309.

Bibliography

LeFevre, Perry. *Understandings of Prayer*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981.

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